

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 AID-05 CEQ-01 CIAE-00 SOE-02
COME-00 DODE-00 EB-08 EPA-04 INR-10 IO-14 L-03
NSF-02 NSC-05 NSAE-00 PM-05 ICA-20 OES-07 SS-15
SP-02 DOE-15 INT-05 AGRE-00 /138 W
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P R 221149Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6302
INFO AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMCONSUL PORTO ALEGRE

UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 2 MONTEVIDEO 1345

PASS TO NOAH

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: TBIO, TOCY, UY
SUBJECT: REPORT OF UNKNOWN OFFSHORE POISONOUS GAS IN SOUTHERN
BRAZIL AND URUGUAY

REF: STATE 099549

1.SUMMARY. URUGUAYAN AND BRAZILIAN SCIENTISTS CONTINUE TO INVESTIGATE THE PRESENCE AND CAUSE OF AN UNKNOWN "POISONOUS GAS" ALONG A 310 MILE STRETCH OF URUGUAYAN -- BRAZILIAN COAST-LINE, AFFECTING FISH, DOMESTIC ANIMALS AND HUMANS. FIRST OBSERVED IN LATE MARCH, THE SITUATION APPEARS TO HAVE RUN ITS COURSE, ALTHOUGH UNUSUALLY HIGH LEVELS OF CHEMICAL AND MICROORGANIC SUBSTANCES REMAIN IN THE SEA. FOUR BASIC THEORIES AS TO THE CAUSE HAVE BEEN ADVANCED; TWO ATTRIBUTING THE PROBLEM TO NATURAL CAUSES, AND TWO TO TOXIC SUBSTANCES. END SUMMARY.

2. URUGUAYAN AND BRAZILIAN HEALTH AUTHORITIES ARE
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CONTINUING THEIR INVESTIGATION OF AN UNKNOWN "POISONOUS GAS" ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST, FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ROCHAS INTO THE BRAZILIAN STATE OF RIO GRANDE DEL SUR, WHICH HAS BEEN KILLING FISH AND SHELLFISH, DOMESTIC ANIMALS AND, REPORTEDLY, TWO HUMANS. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, THE GOU AND THE GOB HAVE JOINTLY DISPATCHED NAVAL RESEARCH SHIPS TO THE AFFECTED AREA AND HAVE ESTABLISHED TEMPORARY

RESEARCH LABORATORIES IN PORTO ALEGRE. THE GOB HAS REQUESTED A WHO SCIENTIST TO JOIN IN THE INVESTIGATION OF THE PHENOMENON WHICH HAS CREATED PANIC AMONG COASTAL INHABITANTS, FORCED EVACUATION OF NUMEROUS COASTAL VILLAGES, AND POSES LONG-TERM HEALTH AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS.

3. THE PHENOMENON WAS FIRST REPORTED IN LATE MARCH WHEN UNUSUALLY LARGE NUMBERS OF DEAD FISH WERE WASHED ASHORE, ACCOMPANIED BY A STRONG SULFUR, AMMONIA GAS. INCREASING NUMBERS OF FISH, MOLLUSKS, SEALS AND SEA BIRDS WERE AFFECTED. HUMANS IN THE AFFECTED AREA WERE SUBJECT TO SORE THROATS, COUGH, AND BRONCHIAL/RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS. REPORTS OF TWO DEATHS ATTRIBUTED TO THE GAS ARE ALSO CIRCULATING. AUTOPSIES HAVE REVEALED ONE DEATH DUE TO MENINGITIS (NOT DIRECTLY LINKED TO THE GAS) AND THE OTHER CAUSE REMAINS UNCONFIRMED. AUTOPSIES ON DOMESTIC ANIMALS HAVE REVEALED EXTENSIVE LIVER DAMAGE. AT PRESENT, HOWEVER, LOCAL PRESS OF APRIL 20 REPORTS THAT THE EFFECT OF THE GAS ON ALL LIFE-FORMS HAS VIRTUALLY DISAPPEARED.

4. FOUR THEORIES AS TO THE CAUSE OF THE GASEOUS PHENOMENON AND ITS EFFECTS HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED:
A. NATURAL: DURING THE LAST DAYS OF MARCH, THE EASTERN COASTLINE WAS AFFECTED BY UNUSUALLY STRONG SOUTHERLY WINDS AND ACCOMPANYING HIGH TIDES. FOLLOWING THESE
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HIGH TIDES, LARGE QUANTITIES OF SEA MOLLUSKS WERE DESTROYED, AS IS REPORTEDLY COMMON DURING SUCH PERIODS. THE SUDDEN OUTFLOW OF LITTORAL LAGOONS PULLED FRESH WATER FISH INTO THE SEA, WHICH DIED AS A RESULT OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE (PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE URUGUAYAN NATIONAL FISHING INSTITUTE AND THE OCEANOGRAPHIC, HYDROGRAPHIC AND METEOROLOGICAL SERVICE OF THE URUGUAYAN NAVY).

B. NATURAL: THE PHENOMENON HAS BEEN EQUATED WITH THE "RED TIDE", AN ECOLOGIC IMBALANCE RESULTING FROM THE RAPID REPRODUCTION OF MICROORGANIC DINOFLAGELLAE.

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THESE MICROORGANISMS GENERALLY PROLIFERATE AFTER HEAVY RAINS WHICH LOWER THE SALT CONTENT OF SEA WATER. THE ORGANISM CONSUMES LARGE QUANTITIES OF OXYGEN, FATAL TO SEA LIFE AND GIVES OFF QUANTITIES OF HYDROSULFURIC ACID, WHICH IS VAPORIZED BY THE OCEAN'S WAVES, THUS AFFECTING THE RESPIRATORY SYSTEMS OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS (PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF DR. JORGE CHEBATAROFF, URUGUAYAN PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF THE REPUBLIC; AND BRAZILIAN MINISTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH, DR. ALMEIDA DA MACHADO).

C. TOXIC SUBSTANCE: IN FEBRUARY, 1978, THE BRAZILIAN FREIGHTER ITAPAGE LOST ITS CARGO OF METHYL ISOTHIOCYANATE, A POISONOUS AGRICULTURAL PESTICIDE, DURING A STORM OFF THE AFFECTED COASTLINE. THIS CRYSTALLIZED CHEMICAL WHEN MIXED WITH WATER PRODUCES A POISONOUS GAS, HARMFUL TO ALL LIFE-FORMS. CONCENTRATIONS OF THE CHEMICAL MAY HAVE BEEN WASHED ASHORE BY THE OCEAN CURRENTS (PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE UNCLASSIFIED

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URUGUAYAN MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH).

D. TOXIC SUBSTANCE: IN 1971, ANOTHER BRAZILIAN FREIGHTER, THE TAQUARI SANK IN THE AFFECTED AREA, CARRYING IN ITS HOLD 14 TONS OF ETHYL AND PROPANE IN HEAVY STEEL TANKS. DOW CHEMICAL SPOKESMEN HAVE CONFIRMED THAT THE TAQUARI WAS ALSO CARRYING CAUSTIC CHEMICAL SODAS AND MERCURY COMPOUNDS. THESE MERCURIC COMPOUNDS MAY HAVE LEAKED FROM THE CARGO COMPARTMENT, THUS CAUSING THE CONTAMINATION. HIGH LEVELS

OF MERCURY HAVE BEEN FOUND IN MANY OF THE DEAD SEA
LIFE (PRELIMINARY FINDING OF THE BRAZILIAN NAVY,
AS REPORTED BY UPI).

5. BRAZILIAN AUTHORITIES HAVE EVACUATED NUMEROUS COASTAL
VILLAGES AND HAVE PROHIBITED FISHING WITHIN 30 MILES
OF THE AFFECTED AREA. CITIZENS ARE BEING URGED NOT TO
CONSUME SEAFOOD FROM THE AREA. LOCAL PRESS OF APRIL 21
REPORTS THAT THE GOB HAS INDEFINITELY SUSPENDED ITS IM-
PORTS OF URUGUAYAN FISH, THUS CUTTING OFF URUGUAY'S
LARGEST EXPORT MARKET (APPROXIMATELY 6,000 TONS IN 1977).

6. THE GOU'S PUBLIC HEALTH AUTHORITY'S DEFINITIVE
STATEMENT OF CAUSE IS EXPECTED SHORTLY. THE EMBASSY WILL
FOLLOW THE GOU INVESTIGATION TO ASSESS NOT ONLY THE LOCAL
ECONOMIC IMPACT, BUT ALSO TO DETERMINE POSSIBLE EFFECTS
ON EXISTING AND POTENTIAL URUGUAYAN FISH EXPORTS TO THE
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Message Attributes

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Draft Date: 22 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
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Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
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Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
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Drafter: n/a
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